

Editorial 2 - *The Reading Loft* – Using Literature as a Tool for Maintaining a Balanced Life.

Reading Your Mind

by Hermann A. Peine, Ph.D.

Why should one read? This question is easier to ask than to answer. While recently leading an adult group discussion I asked a similar question, why do people eat? Like the reading question, easy to ask, but difficult to answer. Two hours of group interaction still produced an incomplete answer. Reflecting on that experience led me to do a good deal of self-analysis to find answers to the reading question.

In my pondering I thought about individual and cross-cultural differences, on the uses and needs of reading at different life stages, and on the pleasure and satisfaction that can come from reading good literature. The longer I deliberated the more complex the whole situation became. So I began to give up, but not before I came up with the brilliant observation that you eat to stay alive, and reading is what makes humans different from animals lower on the evolutionary scale.

I obviously wasn't satisfied with the above, so I went back to the drawing board. Why was it that, as a therapist, I encouraged so many families I worked with to develop the reading habit. Why was it that the literature offered so many insights so desperately needed by so many hurting people? When asked in this context, why read, the answer became obvious, to gain and maintain balance.

Balance in a person's life is a quality which everyone needs. Extremes bring sickness. A simple way of viewing this is to look at human behavior and emotion on a continuum from being

out of control or "expansive" to being rigid and unteachable or "contractive". All human qualities may be viewed on such a continuum. Since behaviors, feelings, and emotions are interactive, they influence each other and being out of balance in one area impacts the others. Each of us can view ourselves as having an emotional self, a social self, intellectual self, a physical self, and a spiritual reflective self. Self evaluation for balance in each area is not only helpful, but necessary.

When any of our many selves swings from either side of a rational center there may follow superficial functioning. Living a balanced life often brings knowledge and power far greater than the sum of our individual selves. Why is it that man is always talking about balance. We talk about a balance in nature, a balanced economy, balanced diet, balanced personality. It all implies a desire to live a balanced life by centered living.

Life at the extremes, and many people do live in the fast lane and burn the candle at both ends, is very precarious. We only need look at the increased lifestyle diseases such as cancer, heart attacks and strokes to see the outcome.

Learning balance is, it seems to me, one of life's great challenges. Learning it by trial and error is often a painful path. Learning it through observing one's parents is increasingly difficult as increasingly both parents work outside the home and have decreased interactions with their

children. These adults are just trying to maintain some kind of balance in their own lives. Television is not the answer, since much of the message is glorification of the extremes and an unrealistic presentation of rational living. So who is left for this critical modeling of balance in lifestyle? Perhaps a good friend, a teacher, coach, neighbor or relative fits the roll. But what of those that don't have such a model? Literature seems to be the answer. In the pages of good books are to be found the experiences of human nature since man started keeping record. It's all to be found there and in the process of slowing down to read the insights gained by man over the centuries, balance may be achieved in both mind and spirit. Too much reading, however, may continue to be at an extreme, since the body also needs its share of our attention.

So why read? No, it's not like saying why breathe, for many people go through life and are very happy without books, but in our society one of the things we need to read about are these very people. I speak of primitive people who were in balance with the world around them. Lacking insight into the hopes, wishes, dreams, pains, and disappointments of those who have gone on before places people at higher risk for extreme living. Reading may prove to be a person's lifeline. It's a line that can help many avoid or decrease stress stemming from imbalance. What a good reason to read.